

Hypermestra, Io, and Dual Identities in *Heroides* 14

In *Heroides* 14, Hypermestra writes to her husband, Lynceus, to persuade him to come to her rescue. Her father has imprisoned her for being the only one of the fifty Danaids to refuse to kill her husband. Throughout her letter, Hypermestra highlights the dual nature of her refusal to carry out her father's orders; for her, not committing a crime has become a punishable offense. That she was *pia* resulted in her imprisonment (4); she must defend herself for committing an act worthy of praise (6; 120). As she contemplates the violent act demanded of her, she makes it clear that the act is pivotal in defining her identity. She insists that her identity as a young woman of gentle nature makes her unsuited to such violence (55-6). The stability and continuity of that nature is threatened as she is suspended between the *impietas* of murdering her husband and the *impietas* of defying her father. The juxtaposition of competing terms, *laus* and *rea*, *scelus* and *pia*, highlights the irreconcilable pressures on her. She is concerned with preserving her identity, but has been put in a situation where that is not possible.

Hypermestra apostrophizes her ancestress Io (85-108) as she contemplates, terrified, her changed form. I argue that this passage focuses the concerns surrounding Hypermestra's own threatened identity and so is integral to the rhetorical structure of the letter (Jäkel 1973; Jacobson 1974; Fulkerson 2003). I examine first Hypermestra's presentation of the dual nature of her defiance of her father. Her concern for the continuity of her identity is manifested by her insistence on her feminine nature; she considers the significance of familial identity with recurring references to her relationship to her father and ancestors; she questions the relationship between her character and her physical body as she describes her hand as an agent acting independently of her as it lifts the sword to kill Lynceus. I then turn to the ways the Io passage engages with these concerns. Io's terror at her changed state, her familial connection to Hypermestra, the clear distinction between her external form and internal nature concentrate the thematic concerns of the letter. Finally, I suggest that the letter itself serves as an effective vehicle for Hypermestra's fraught self-presentation as it is suspended between her dual identities.

Works Cited:

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